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ABSTRACT

As videocassettes of foreign films become more available, teachers will be able to show more films and bring students closer to the second language and culture. However, unfocused viewing will not develop language and cultural proficiency adequately. Class time is better spent in preparing for or reacting to the film than in viewing the film in its entirety. Students can view the film independently or in small segments. Pre-viewing activities, which can reduce the tension students feel at the dialogue's pace, can focus on linguistic features such as vocabulary and slang, cultural and historical background, scene previews, reading the screenplay, characters and plots, cinematographic topics such as directing style or the film genre's conventions, and what the student's will need to know or observe for the postviewing activities. Focused viewing exercises can stress listening, reading of credits or other writing on the screen, and observation. Postviewing activities including written assignments and class discussion can emphasize the film itself or appeal to the students' imagination and creativity. Teacher-developed viewing guides distributed to students help in each of these phases. (MSE)

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The VCR Revolution: Feature Films for Language and Cultural Proficiency

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It is difficult to imagine having to persuade a language teacher of the advantages of feature films. How many times have most of us found ourselves watching a foreign movie we would never have chosen to attend if it had been made in the United States simply because it puts us in direct touch with the authentic patterns of speech and cultural milieu of the language we teach. For an hour we become part of the audience of native speakers the film was produced to entertain.

There are two reasons more use has not been made of films in the past. First, the expense and inconvenience of mail-order rental and the need for unwieldy projection equipment have discouraged many. Second, the element that makes feature films so attractive—the fact that they are intended for an audience that is linguistically and culturally competent—becomes an obstacle. Considerable adaptation is required before they are accessible to an audience of language learners with rudimentary experience in the target culture. The VCR Revolution has all but solved the first problem; reasonably priced cassettes can be shown with little technical expertise. However, the challenge of transforming a film designed to entertain one audience into a learning experience for another remains. Both the entertainment and instructional potential of a movie are diminished when we show it to an unprepared class with the vague expectation of stimulating discussion afterwards.

The goal of this article is to summarize some strategies that promote effective use of feature films in the classroom. They have been selected to illustrate two components. The first is *active viewing* rather than merely viewing for entertainment. This requires ample preparation by students before seeing the film, preparation for which the instructor is responsible. The second, *viewing as a learning experience*, expands students' cultural awareness and ability to use the target language.

A Model

The list of activities to be presented in this article is, of course, far from exhaustive. Nonetheless, organizing the suggestions around a grid that generates a comprehensive model provides some assurance that the range of strategies is as broad as possible. This grid (Figure 1) includes the following:

1. It incorporates the productive and receptive skills that will be engaged during the activities. Observing is included among the receptive skills along with listening and reading. The ability to recognize proxemics, gestures, and body language is now acknowledged as a necessary competence by language specialists. Observation also extends beyond paralinguistic features to the wealth of visual information the film contains.
2. It also takes into account three phases that come into play when active viewing is joined to language learning:
   Previewing. This preparatory stage supplies all information needed to appreciate the film (vocabulary, cultural background, and story line) and acquaints students with the topics to be discussed after having viewed it.
   Focused viewing. This is the most neglected phase; it includes activities to promote close attention while watching the film, and by extension brief activities that grow out of closely observing short segments.
   Postviewing. These strategies integrate and expand the students' observations or include various spinoff activities.

Two other areas are stressed in discussing the film: the story itself (along

Figure 1. Grid of Activities

	Productive speaking / writing	*Receptive* listening / reading / observing
Previewing		
Focused Viewing		
Postviewing		

with its cinematographic presentation) and its cultural setting. The suggestions are geared for the most part to intermediate students and are inspired by experiments with video in third-semester French classes at our university. Some, however, are more suitable for higher levels.

Considerations and Cautions

The allure of the feature film for introducing students to the second culture is so strong that a caveat is perhaps in order. Some years ago French moviegoers were asked to give their definition of cinema for a poll published in the newsmagazine *L'Express*. Fifty-four percent opted for a definition of escapist entertainment—"the possibility of escaping from everyday life." Thirty-one percent identified it with "a means of learning new things," while only 15 percent saw it as "the representation of life as it is lived" (Heymann, 3, p. 126). Although this is only one country, and the foreign films that reach the United States market in cassette form are not necessarily typical of their country's production, such figures should give us pause. It may be that films that seem to make us observers, even participants in the most intimate moments of life in the other culture, are not representations of life as it is lived.

The illusion stems from the fact that the movie camera confers on the object it represents a second presence so immediate that it rivals the object itself. Producers of space odysseys or horror films exploit this immediacy to give credence to the incredible. The conventions of many movie genres that are much less far-fetched require that no matter how exceptional the events in the film might be, the settings should convey an air of verisimilitude that can be transferred to the plot and characterization.

The director's effort to evoke an authentic background provides a wealth of surface detail about daily life—the typical patterns of dress, food, transportation, etc.—that the target audience is expected to recognize as true to life. This authenticity at times extends to deeper cultural elements—including social roles and institutions, the value system, attitudes, or world view. It is perhaps more common, however, for the characters to act out their values in ways that involve some departure from the average or the typical. Many films are designed like comedies to evoke a degree of fear in the audience, or like sentimental

romances to embellish some hard reality, or to provide the excitement of the extraordinary to enliven an otherwise humdrum existence as adventure films do. Feature films are not mirrors that reflect cultural values objectively from a neutral vantage point. As part of the culture that produced them, they must be interpreted in terms of their function within the culture.[1]

The fact that feature films are not documentaries, not anthropological slices of life, makes them all the more useful to language teachers. The ultimate fascination is to go beyond the surface detail that often does have documentary value to identify the deeper cultural meanings the film represents. This process requires students to investigate more comprehensive and objective sources of information to put the movie's presentation in a broader light through reading assignments, research projects, or oral reports.

Second, especially in cases where the instructor prefers not to delve too deeply into these questions, it is completely appropriate to handle the film's theme, plot, and characterization in terms of what a movie is above all—a work of art. Cinematographic storytelling resembles drama and narrative fiction enough for teachers with some literary training to be at ease with it. How the director activates comic or melodramatic effects, techniques of character presentation, or the relation of plot to theme are all areas that can be treated. Indeed, using the feature film as a bridge between language and literary study has been proposed. Finally, some instructors may wish to give attention to the uniquely cinematographic elements involved in representing events on the screen. Among those aspects that might be discussed are consideration of the film's genre, montage, and the director's place in cinema history.

Tactical Considerations

It is probably just as well that most class periods are too short to show an entire movie. Class time is usually better spent in preparing for or reacting to the film than in devoting large blocks of time to viewing. In some situations it might be appropriate to reserve all class time for working with portions of the screenplay or cultural readings related to the film. In one course, for example, the movie was shown outside of

class; students were expected to see it at their own convenience to prepare for a concluding general discussion. At the other extreme, Garrity (2, p. 41) reports dividing an entire film, Jean Renoir's *La Grande Illusion*, into short segments that were shown to each class over the course of a semester. When working with such brief segments, Willis (8, p. 45) suggests a maximum length of twelve minutes for video scenes, though in most cases the selections will range between one and five minutes. This time period is short enough for students to maintain a high degree of concentration and long enough to provide a coherent exchange of dialogue within the sequence. Even if the scene is shown several times within the same class period, a short fragment allows ample time for activities that reinforce it. After students have worked with selected scenes from the film in such an intense way, they should be allowed the opportunity to catch the sweep of the film by seeing it in one sitting if possible. As will be seen in more detail, video can make a contribution at all stages of film study: during the previewing phase as an attention-getter or tease; as a preliminary to skill-building activities during focused viewing; and in the postviewing period, a screening of the entire movie can set the stage for synthesis and summary.[2]

Previewing

One of the major goals of previewing is to prepare students for active viewing activities. For example, students are often so intimidated by the pace of the dialogue that they glue their eyes to the subtitles with the result that great portions of the visual and auditory elements of the film pass by them unnoticed. Previewing activities reduce this tension by familiarizing students with aspects of the movie that are likely to prove problematic and thus prepare them for high-quality postviewing discussion.

1. Linguistic Features. It is useful to distinguish between features students must recognize to follow the dialogue and vocabulary needed to describe objectives or actions portrayed visually in the film. When students do not have the opportunity to read the screenplay, lexical items can be summarized in lists or preferably presented in context by quoting sentences or fragments from the film. Slang expressions are an example of a typical difficulty. While some instructors may prefer that

students limit their use of slang, movies are ideal for observing slang used in an authentic context. Regional accents can also pose problems. Because phonological analysis is out of place at this level, it might be helpful for students to see the text or hear it pronounced in the standard manner so that they will recognize it in the film.

Descriptions of objects or actions in the film are more successful if activities use vocabulary that students already know (meals, family relationships, transportation, etc.). If necessary, lists can be used to remind students of previously learned words or to expand their vocabularies; or better yet, pertinent items can be incorporated into questions and other written materials.

2. **Culture and History.** Reading lessons or oral reports can be organized around themes suggested by the film. The goal might simply be to orient the students or to provide more extensive information on a topic in order to fit the film's treatment into a broader perspective. A ready source of such readings is the instructor's collection of desk copies of textbooks. With luck a suitable passage adapted to the level of the class can be found there.

3. **Scene Previews.** Previewing selected scenes will put students more at ease when they see them in the context of the entire film. Exposition scenes or episodes that are crucial to plot development might be shown. Previewing is also an excellent introduction to the study of the screenplay because it allows the students to visualize the characters and setting. Before they read a scene, students might be shown the preceding scene or the beginning of the one they will be assigned. Another possibility is to show the video but turn down the sound while covering up any subtitles.

4. **Reading the Screenplay.** Access to the script is an advantage to instructors because in its absence it is necessary to take extensive notes when previewing the film to prepare teaching materials. In those cases where the screenplay has been published, it also opens up a wealth of opportunities for developing reading, speaking, and even listening and writing skills. The screenplay can also be used for work in oral interpretation and pronunciation. For example, the instructor can read portions aloud to test oral comprehension or give students written passages with words omitted for them to fill in as a writing exercise.

5. **Character List and Plot Summary.** If students are going to study disconnected scenes from the film before viewing it in its entirety, a synopsis of the plot can be helpful. A summary like those in TV guides that leave the outcome in suspense can provide preliminary orientation or a more detailed one could serve as a guide to keep viewers abreast of the story line.
6. **Cinematographic Topics.** For those instructors wishing to emphasize the art of filmmaking, consideration of the director's style, the conventions of the film genre, or the traditions of cinema in that particular country will enhance a more technical approach to the movie. Background reading or oral reports could be used to introduce this topic. The film's credits can serve as an initial presentation of the needed technical vocabulary.
7. **Introducing the Postviewing Activities.** In a very real sense these preparatory activities in the first phase are designed to ensure the success of the ones in the concluding phase. Students must be alerted early on to the information they will need to perform well in the final stage.

Focused Viewing

Active viewing is directed viewing that sharpens students' listening, reading, and observation skills by focusing their attention on items that might otherwise be lost in the unfamiliar and often intimidating world they find in the foreign film. The following activities work best when the film is broken down into segments, but more general questions along the same lines can be devised if students watch the movie only in one sitting. In that case more detailed observations like the ones below might be assigned to groups. Any kind of exercise that does not require extensive writing can be adapted for these purposes: identifications, multiple choice, true–false statements, fill-in-the-blanks, and even drawings in some cases.

Listening Activities

1. When students have not been able to study the text of the dialogue ahead of time, giving them exercises incorporating

generous samples of the vocabulary used by the actors helps them recognize the words they hear.

2. In order to focus attention on specific linguistic features, students might be asked to jot down examples of slang, formal expressions, regional accents, familiar versus formal second-person use, etc. Alternatively, they might be given lists of such items that appear in a scene and asked to note which characters use them.
3. Students can also be asked to search for examples of various expressions used to convey some idea or emotion, e.g., agreement, fear, surprise, optimism, etc.
4. With more advanced classes, if the movie contains examples of extended discourse (e.g., speeches and lectures), note-taking is in order. This is especially appropriate when the situation in real life might require note-taking skill—for example, a press conference.

Reading Activities

It is not uncommon for movies to require some degree of reading skill—and not only for reading the credits. The text of letters and documents or plot summaries, for example, may be shown on the screen. Deciphering them often presents special difficulties to language learners who cannot process the written text fast enough, especially if it is complicated by an unfamiliar style of script. In addition, shorter written fragments—street signs, billboards, store names—that contain important clues are often overlooked by students.

True–false or multiple-choice exercises can draw attention to crucial points within such documents needed to follow the plot. Since glancing at a handout will distract students from reading the text on screen, the instructor might read aloud such exercises. If the VCR has a freeze-frame control, it can be used to extend students' reading time.

Observation Activities

1. Provide students with two lists, one of gestures and body language and the other of emotions; as they watch the film they

match the two, noting the characters and situations in play; more advanced students need only be given one of the lists. The same can be done for more ritualized gestures like shaking hands or the French exchange of *bises*. Video is the ideal medium for examining how gestures, proxemics, posture, and other paralinguistic features supplement verbal language or in many cases replace it entirely. A strategy for making this clear to students is to play a segment twice. During the first time with no sound, students try to identify the emotions conveyed by the characters' body language; the scene is then repeated with sound to check their findings.

2. Fashion-conscious students can follow the wardrobe of a character, jotting down the activities that call for a change of apparel. If difficult vocabulary is involved, a handout might describe the clothing so that students merely note the situation.
3. In order to draw attention to the physical setting—whether street scenes, the interior of homes, workplaces, or public buildings—students can list differences betwee similar locations in the United States. If the film presents more than one example of the same type of setting, the segments containing them can be compared—a middle class and lower class home, a modern and an older school building, etc.
4. Everyday events such as meals, classroom procedures, marriages, trials, etc. allow for the same kinds of comparison with American culture and of multiple examples within the target culture. Another approach is for the handout to list all the typical components of such an event; students then check off the ones found in the film. Alternatively, the handout might list such components in random order and the students arrange them in the sequence they occur in the film.
5. True–false statements targeting events in the plot that are conveyed without any dialogue test whether students can recognize the necessary vocabulary without any verbal cue within the movie.
6. A similar exercise can be done based on characterization. Students receive brief written descriptions of various characters and match each description with the character's name.

Participation Activities

The activities just discussed are designed to promote attentive observation and are especially useful in studying the cultural component of the film. While they often will become the basis for discussion, they should only require brief notations so as not to disrupt viewing. The following strategies on the other hand encourage students to speak or write in order to react to a segment they have just seen and frequently can be structured to drill some grammar point.

1. After they have watched a scene, have students mimic the intonation and voice patterns of the actors, or more creatively improvise the situation, substituting their own dialogue for the script, perhaps as a voice-over.
2. Students can practice description (adjectives), narrations (present or past tense), or reported speech by summarizing what they have observed or heard.
3. When characters travel about in the film, students can locate the destinations on a map and then give directions for getting there (imperatives).
4. After viewing an episode students can predict what will happen next (future tense), either as narrative plot summary or by writing their own script.
5. Students can practice commands by giving advice to some character.
6. Introduce a new element into a scene—a strange character or an unexpected event—as a springboard for predictions (*if* clauses).
7. Subtitles are a good introduction to the art of translation. A first task is to compare the actual spoken dialogue to the titles; a more difficult activity involves having students subtitle a section of the film themselves, reminding them of the need for concision, accuracy, and polish.

Any number of other strategies for focused viewing will undoubtedly come to mind as instructors adapt specific films to the needs of their classes. The important point is to maintain student interest by selecting activities that are appropriate to the content of the scene when

the film is divided into numerous segments. It can also be useful to explore the richness of a single scene from multiple angles by using one scene as a point of departure for a number of such strategies. Each activity thus reinforces the next one.

Postviewing

During the postviewing phase the close observations made during the course of the preceding sections, along with any supplemental readings into a synthesis of the film, can be expanded and discussed further. Given the difficulty of stimulating meaningful discussion at the intermediate level in the foreign language, the same kind of careful preparation that characterized the first two stages is all the more necessary. Written reports, essays, or film reviews can often be used to prepare students for class discussions and debates. Two techniques are usually effective to guide discussion: (1) a series of closely focused questions that outline the issues the instructor wishes to stress, and (2) true–false statements that address such issues. Students must give illustrations for the true statements and correct the false ones.

Postviewing discussion usually tends to center on two chief topics: either the quality of the film as entertainment or its cultural content. The first deals with how the director handles plot, characterization, and cinematographic technique, whereas the second explores cultural themes in the broader context of more complete information about the topic to determine the viewpoint of the film or to compare it with American culture.

The postviewing phase can lead to spin-off activities that appeal strongly to the imagination and energy of students.

1. Students can imagine themselves to be journalists who have stepped into the setting of the film and write short feature and news articles under such headings as "sports," "fashion," "people," and "classified ads." The issue of the local newspaper they prepare might include a review of the film.
2. Student guest hosts interview classmates who assume the role of characters in the film and respond to questions, whether directly related to the film or not.

3. Students create and model styles seen in the film and accompany them with a descriptive narrative.
4. A character can be put on trial for some offense, real or imaginary, committed in the film.
5. Students prepare a story outline or a script for a sequel to the film.

Viewing Guides

The handouts, or viewing guides as Lonergan (5) calls them, that students receive provide an apt practical summary of the elements teachers must consider when preparing students for viewing. Such guides will be more or less elaborate, depending on whether students have access to the script and how much class time is being devoted to the movie. For example, materials used for previewing activities should include the following: (1) title, director, actors, and date; (2) the names of characters with brief identifications like family relations and professions; (3) an introduction to plot and setting, especially if students are being shown isolated segments from the film, as well as the vocabulary needed for discussion; (4) vocabulary needed for viewing, in the form of either lists or quotations from the dialogue; and (5) readings from the screenplay or on cultural topics.

Focused viewing guides should contain directions for the short activities geared to segments of the film and can be placed on handouts, on the board, or on an overhead projector. While students watch the entire film they can work through a list of true–false statements without disrupting their enjoyment.

Finally, in postviewing activities, the general topics of discussion should be introduced to students before they view the film. Specific directions for activities are in order here so that students have a clear idea of what is expected of them.

Conclusion

As videocassettes of foreign films become increasingly available, we seem indeed to be on the verge of the VCR Revolution, which will allow teachers to show a larger number of films (and more economically) than in the past and, in so doing, present yet another way to bring

students closer to the second language and culture. Unfocused viewing of these feature films, however, will not develop adequately the language and cultural proficiency of the student. Classes prepared for active viewing using the techniques outlined in this article will find these films more enjoyable and will be better able to profit from the linguistic and cultural advantages that films offer. Instructors, on the other hand, will have the satisfaction of having prepared their students for the viewing of feature films in ways that will enable them to participate more actively in a second culture.

Notes

1. Our suggestions for dealing with culture are aimed chiefly at observing surface aspects. For suggestions on studying other aspects in more depth see Carr (1).
2. Konrad (4) discusses the technical side of video and lists addresses for buying cassettes, service, and equipment.

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